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Donyi Polo Apatani

Abstract

The Apatani are a non-nomadic, nature worshipping tribe who consider the Sun and the Moon their God, the Sun considered female and called Mother Sun. They have a sibling relationship with nature and perceive prosperity as a harmonious condition between man and nature.

Author/Artist Bio

Sej Saraiya is a fine-art and documentary photographer and creative director who has spent the last several years documenting indigenous cultures around the world. She graduated with a Master's degree from the University of Southern California in 2009, and has since traveled to the deep interiors of Asia and the Americas, capturing portraits that tell stories of cultures on the brink of extinction. She has two major bodies of work: Advaita (2015) which focuses on the universal 'interwovenness' of all living beings, and Faces of the Indigenous (2018), an on-going and powerful document on rapidly vanishing cultures around the world, which recently won a GIIFF award in Los Angeles. Her artwork hangs in private collections in Belgium, Switzerland, California, Vancouver, New York, and India. sejalsaraiya.com

Keywords

Apatani tribe, conservation, India, agricultural practices

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Women of the Apatani Tribe

Sejal Saraiya

Donyi Polo Apatani

Sejal Saraiya

In April 2018, I visited the Ziro Valley to learn about the Apatani people of north-east India, document their ancient practices and medicinal plants. I was especially intrigued to learn about the story behind the nose-plugs worn by the women of the tribe and the facial tattoos that bore much similarity to the women of Chin State in Western Burma. I had no idea then what I was in for.

The Apatani are a non-nomadic, nature worshipping tribe who consider the Sun and the Moon their God, the Sun considered female and called Mother Sun. They have a sibling relationship with nature and perceive prosperity as a harmonious condition between man and nature. Their inherent knowledge of edible plants allows them to solely depend on nature for healing.

Typically, every Apatani house has its own kitchen garden, a fire-place where the family gathers and eats. The Apatanis are also known for a unique beverage i.e. kiwi wine. The kiwis that grow in this region are not palatable fresh and hence the Apatanis make Kiwi wine.

Even today, the Apatani continue to practice sacred rituals honoring Mother Earth. They use paddy cum fish cultivation where along with paddy, fish is reared on the fields, cultivating rice without the use of machinery or pesticides. Their intelligent usage of land and agricultural practices have been acquired over centuries and ensure efficient conservation through natural practices without the use of fertilizers. Their land was recently nominated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site for their approach to environmental preservation.

The women with nose-plugs in the photograph are roughly 85 years of age, sisters-in-law, sitting inside their home which is a traditional style bamboo home built on stilts. Apatani women were considered to be the most beautiful in Arunachal Pradesh. Men from other tribes would kidnap them, to prevent which young Tani girls were given bamboo nose-plugs to make them look less appealing and their faces were tattooed to identify them. The practice was finally banned in the 1970's and the last generation of these women is now in their late eighties.

The tribe is known for their unique ways of preserving their lands and living in perfect co-existence with nature even through changing times by using ancient traditional practices. These ways are not only worth learning about but might also be quite crucial in facilitating the conservation of our planet.